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ABSTRACT

Regardless of their educational or financial level, parents have a twofold responsibility for their child's development in reading. First, they must inform themselves: this involves both developing a clear understanding of reading as a process of active, selective thinking and obtaining an accurate account of their child's reading level and ability. In addition, they must know enough about what a good reading program includes and what their child's school is trying to do, in order to form an intelligent judgment regarding their child's reading program. Because good readers come from homes where reading is an important activity, parents have a second responsibility: to act in their child's behalf by providing a literate example, a place and a time for reading, appropriate reading materials, and a respectful acceptance of the child's reading ability and needs. (A list of children's magazines is included.) (MAI)

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PARENT'S RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CHILDREN'S READING*

by
John R. Rogers

When I accepted this assignment to present a paper to this 1978 conference on "Parent's Responsibilities for Children's Reading," I did it because I wanted to rethink a topic which I suspected had changed radically since the time I last spoke on it.

I well remember the last time I addressed this subject. Sometime during the snowy months, December or January of 1954, I received -- and accepted -- an invitation to address a P.T.A. group of an elementary school in Whitehaven -- a very posh residential area in Memphis, Tennessee. At that time, I headed the reading program at the University of Mississippi.

What motivated me to accept the present invitation was the realization that what most of us are really concerned about today when we broach this topic is the role, relationships, and responsibilities of poorer parents in less privileged neighborhoods for their children's reading. After about twenty years of head start, compensatory programs, Title 1-2-3-4 programs -- not to mention the outpouring of millions upon millions of hard earned and hard paid tax dollars, many of us are beginning to suspect that no matter how much money we are willing to spend, no matter how dedicated our teachers are, no matter how hard we try, neither Big Brother, any and all governmental agencies, nor even the combined forces of the entir ucational establishment can do the job by themselves.

*Speech presented at the twenty-third annual convention of I.R.A., Houston, Texas, May 4, 1978.

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All of a sudden, it seems, it has dawned that the old aphorism, "Like father, like son," may still be true. And, all of a sudden, many of us are beginning to realize that parents and the home are still of paramount importance. Even if the parents happen to be poor. And even if the home happens to be modest.

And so a "new old thought" has seized us all. If the school is really to influence the lives of children, it must work with -- even consider itself partners -- if not outright servants of -- the patrons whom they serve. We have too often ignored parents simply because we considered them too poor or too illiterate to be really able to make wise choices where the welfare of their children is concerned.

So, since 1954, the wheel has come full, circle. And now, after a quarter of a century, I welcomed an opportunity to re-think what I would say to parents about their responsibilities for their children's reading.

And I began to think just as I began to think when I received that similar invitation to speak twenty-five years ago.

Except this time, I had a different audience in mind -- you whom I am honored to address today.

When I asked myself who might be motivated to come to this particular session when they might have elected to attend any one of scores of other exciting sessions addressed by far more distinguished speakers than the one who stands before you, it came to me that the audience would probably consist of teachers, principals, other adiministrators, and college personnel who are seeking ideas about what the role of the less privileged parent is. I even suspected that many of you would be faced with assignments to -- or invitations to -- talk with such parents or even make formal addresses to them.

So, I began to think, and certain ideas began to come to me, and they began to assume relationships, and to arrange themselves into a sort of an outline.

And the more I thought, the stronger became an uneasy suspicion that I had tought these thoughts before. All at once it dawned on me. In my mind I was writing a talk for poor semi-illiterate parents that seemed to differ little from what I vaguely remembered having said to that elite P.T.A. group in Whitehaven so many years ago.

So, I went to my file of speeches past -- and sure enough -- there it was just as I had filed it away that snowy evening so long ago when I returned to Oxford from Whitehaven.

And here it is today. I could have edited it here and there, but I decided to deliver it to you in its original form because -- after I have finished -- I am going to give you a chance to tell me whether it is still valid -- or just how it should be changed to make it appropriate for this group of parents whom, we have finally decided, we must ignore no longer.

To guide your listenting, I have had reproduced for you the original outline of the talk. The only thing different is the footnote at the bottom of the page. If you like, I hereby give my permission for you to use the outline for a similar talk when you are invited to make it.

One thing has changed. I have added to the back of the outline an up-to-date list of magazines for children which you will hear referred to again.

PARENT'S RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CHILDREN'S READING*

I. Parents <u>are</u> responsible for their children.

II. Responsible for <u>knowing</u>:

A. What reading--good reading--is

B. How well his child reads

C. Enough about what a good reading program is and what his child's school is trying to do in order to have an informed, intelligent opinion about it

III. Responsible for <u>action</u>:

A. Providing a literate example

B. Providing a place and a time for reading

C. Providing something to read

D. Acting in accord with child's reading needs

*Outline of speech presented by John Rogers of Texas Tech University at the twenty-third annual convention of I.R.A., Houston, Texas, May 4, 1978. (And to a P.T.A. group in Whitehaven, Tennessee in December, 1954.)

PERIODICALS FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

American Girl, The (Girls Scouts of the United States, 820 Third Ave., New York, 10022).

American Junior Red Cross News (American National Red Cross, 17 and D Streets, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006).

Arts and Activities (Jones Publishing Company, 8150 North Central Park Ave., Skokie, Illinois 60076).

Audubon (National Audubon Society, 1130 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10028).

Boys' Life (Boy Scouts of America, New Brunswick, N.J. 08903).

Calling All Girls (The Parents' Institute of Parents' Magazine, 52 Vanderbilt Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017).

Child Life Magazine (Child Life, Inc., 36 Federal Street, Boston, Mass. 02110).

Children's Digest, combined with Humpty Dumpty's Magazine (The Parents' Institute of Parents' Magazine, 52 Vanderbilt Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017).

Children's Playmate Magazine (Children's Playmate Magazine, Inc., 3025 East 75th Street, Cleveland, Ohio 44104).

Golden Magazine (Western Publishing Company Inc., 1220 Mound Ave., Racine, Wis. 53404).

Highlights for Children (Highlights for Children, 2300 West Fifth Ave., Columbus, OH 43216).

Humpty Dumpty's Magazine, combined with Children's Digest (The Parents' Institute of Parents' Magazine, 52 Vanderbilt Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017).

Jack and Jill (Curtis Publishing Company, Independence Square, Philadelphia, PA 19105).

Junior Natural History Magazine (American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79th Street, New York, N.Y. 10024).

Junior Scholastic (Scholastic Magazine, Inc., 50 West 44th Street, New York, N.Y. 10036).

Model Airplane News (Air Age, Inc., 551 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017).

National Geographic Magazine (National Geographic Society, 17th and M. Street, Washington, D.C. 20036).

National Geographic World (National Geographic Society, 17th and M. Street, Washington, D.C.).

Peck-of-Fun (Clapper Publishing Company, P.O. Box 568, Park Ridge, Ill. 60068).

Plays (Plays, Inc., 8 Arlington Street, Boston, Mass. 02116).

Popular Mechanics (Popular Mechanics, 575 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022).

Popular Science (355 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017).

Summertime (Scholastic Magazines, Inc., 33 West 42nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10036).

Wee Wisdom (Unity School of Christianity, Lee's Summit, Mo. 64063).

PARENT'S RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CHILDREN'S READING

In this day of deliberate movement toward a planned society, there is an increasing rapid assumption of responsibility for -- and authority over -- all persons by governmental and other societal agencies. The resultant blessings of this movement may not be completely unalloyed.

The history of American education offers a near perfect illustration of the point I wish to make. When our country was young, there was universal agreement concerning (and understanding) of what our schools were to teach and how they were to teach it. Parents simply pooled their resources, hired a teacher, bought some books, provided a meeting place. Above all -- they knew exactly what was going on in the school from day to day. If things didn't go to suit them, they did not hesitate to replace the teacher on short notice -- or to take any other action which they deemed good for their children. After all, (and this is the point) they felt that they, and they alone, were responsible for their children.

As time passed, however, and life and the schooling of the young became increasingly more complex, more involved, and more complicated, there developed a very natural tendency to "leave it to the professionals -- on the grounds that -- they know what they are doing." Like many other basically good ideas, this one tended -- somewhere along the line -- to get out of hand. Two forces have been at work. Too many people have been perfectly willing to turn as much responsibility for their children as possible over to the school, (and other governmental agencies) and all too many schools have eagerly assumed as much responsibility and control as they possibly can.

The unfortunate net result of this whole movement is that many parents -- wanting to do what is best for their children -- and knowing that they are not professionally trained as teachers -- have come to be somehow, vaguely uneasy and confused as to what should be their roles and what exactly are their responsibilities as conscientious parents.

Without apology, then, the first -- and major -- point I want to make today is the old-fashioned one that children are immature members of the state -- not its chattels. And it is your business to know what is being done to and for your child by the school. You are not a reading teacher, true enough; but you do have inescapable responsibilities for your child's reading development. I shall devote the remainder of my time to an attempt to help you clearly identify your responsibilities and to give you some practical and common sense advice as to how you may discharge them.

My talk will be divided into two sections -- one dealing with what you should know, and one dealing with what you should do as a responsible parent. There are three things you should know:

(1) what reading -- good reading -- is

(2) how well your child reads

(3) enough about what a good reading program is and enough about what your school is trying to do to have an intelligent and informed opinion about it.

So far as action is concerned, there are four things which you should do in order to help your child become a better reader:

(1) provide a literate example

(2) provide a place and a time for reading

(3) provide something for him to read

(4) act in accord with your child's reading needs.

Let us proceed, then, to the development of the three things you should know.

If you are to exercise your broader responsibility concerning your child's reading behavior, it seems obvious that you must have a clear and sensible understanding of what reading -- good reading -- is. Our task is complicated by the truism that familiarity breeds contempt. Because we have done it so long, and because we have the familiarity born of long practice, we may be beguiled by the natural -- but entirely erroneous -- assumption that reading is really a relatively simple process, just a matter of spelling out letters to form words and saying the words to ourselves. This assumption is as deceptive as assuming that we know all about the marvel of television -- you just turn a couple of knobs and that's all there is to it.

There is neither time nor need here for a comprehensive discussion of the tremendously complicated and involved processes which we call reading. It is sufficient for our purposes to note that:

(1) reading, real reading, is not a mere calling of words nor is it even the passive taking in of meaning

(2) without comprehension, there is no reading -- or to put it another way, if you don't understand it, you haven't read it

(3) there are several kinds and levels of reading; and good reading demands that we adjust our rate and manner of reading to the task at hand. We must be able to skim to get the general gist of a news story, or to read carefully and critically to evaluate a technical report.

(4) We may sum up what reading is by pointing out that above all, reading is a process of active, selective, thinking. No person can read more rapidly than he can think. The efficient reader reads only slightly more slowly.

In order to discharge your responsibility for your child's reading, it is necessary that you have a clear knowledge about how well he reads. You are not only entitled to this accurate knowledge, you are responsible for having it.

How and where do you get this information?

(1) ask you child's teacher. She knows how well he can read, and she can tell you; but you must ask for the information -- and then listen.

(2) forget that you are not a reading "expert." You aren't an art critic, either, but you can tell whether a picture looks like what it is supposed to represent. Use your common sense. Have your child read for you and observe his reading behavior. A good reader, when reading material of suitable difficulty:

(a) reads in a conversational tone with proper phrasing, intonation, and observation of punctuation

(b) does not stumble over too many words, and he should be able to figure out for himself most of those which he <u>does</u> stumble over

(c) should be able to answer reasonable questions about the material he has just read.

If this sounds too simple, note that this exact procedure is our basic approach to the clinical diagnosis of reading difficulties. A good reader:

(1) understands what he reads

(2) is able to evaluate what he reads

(3) is discriminating in his reading tastes

(4) knows where and how to locate information

(5) can organize, remember, and use what he has read.

I am sometimes shocked to hear an otherwise responsible parent say, "Our school does an excellent job of teaching reading," or "Our school doesn't teach children to read." When I know that the person making the sweeping statement really has only the foggiest notion of what the school is really doing about reading instruction. If you've been guilty of this, all I can say is that you ought to be ashamed of yourself.

You should know enough about what your school is doing in reading to have an informed and intelligent opinion about it. Here's how you can inform yourself. Ask. Ask your child. Ask his teacher. Ask the principal. Finally, visit the school and see for yourself.

Here are some criteria which you can use in evaluating the reading program in your school:

(1) There should actually be an organized, planned, over-all reading program which is sensibly designed to attain clear cut objectives known to, and agreed upon, by all the teachers; for instance, every good elementary school should make definite provision for teaching children how to use a dictionary. This should not be left to chance. It is easy for every teacher to assume that some other teacher will do it. Primary responsibility should be assigned to a certain grade, and all of the teachers should know it.

(2) All essential aspects of a complete program should be provided for. Your school should actually have three organized reading programs -- each carefully planned and carefully administered:

(a) the fundamentals of reading

(b) the reading-study jobs

(c) children's literature

(3) Provision must be made for each child to learn at his own level -- He can learn at no other. If all of the children in a classroom are reading the same story in the same program at the same time, you can be absolutely certain that the less able fifteen to twenty-five percent and the most able fifteen to twenty-five percent are wasting their time during the reading period.

(4) There must be adequate materials

(a) at least three levels of basic materials in each classroom

(b) plenty of interesting books at a reasonable range of difficulty levels -- look for some newer ones

(c) a set of encyclopedias for each classroom above the second grade

(d) adequate dictionaries -- preferably one for each child (resist temptation to be dogmatic)

(5) Some provision must be made for the child who has special reading needs. (The one or two least able and the one or two most able.) Mention Reading Clinic.

As I reach the half-way point in my remarks, let me reiterate briefly what a responsible parent needs to know in order to be a good parent of a developing reader. He should know what reading is. He should know how well his child reads, and he should know what his school is doing about reading instruction.

I shall spend the time that remains to me in discussing the things that a responsible parent must do in order to help his child become a better reader.

Good readers come from homes in which reading is an important activity. What fair assumption could your child make solely on the basis of his observation of your reading behavior?

If books, magazines, newspapers are read and discussed in your home, they will likely figure prominently in the home your child will eventually establish for his family.

If adult reading in your home is limited to a daily newspaper, it is a safe bet that your child's mature behavior will be patterned accordingly. He looks like you. He talks like you. He thinks like you. And, if nature takes its course, you can be sure that he will eventually develop reading habits that are much like your own.

Children do not learn by experience alone, however. Precept, too, is still much in order. One of the most obvious -- and important -- things you can do for your reading child is to see that he has an adequate place for reading, and -- perhaps even more important -- that a definite time be set aside in his daily schedule for reading.

Every child can't have a room all his own, tailored especially for his own needs; but most can have a desk or table of their own -- in some adequately heated, lighted, and ventilated room; all can have a quiet place and time -- either away from TV or with the TV turned off during the scheduled time for reading. The dining room table of yesteryear was near ideal, a little searching will find a suitable modern counterpart in nearly every home.

Not only must your child have a place and time for reading -- he can't read unless he has something to read. He probably won't read unless he has something to read which is of interest to him.

Excellent libraries with outstanding children's collections are available to everyone in this room. See that your child has a library card and then make sure that he uses it.

Your child deserves a book collection of his own. The purchase of even

one carefully selected book a month will produce a prized collection in time. Most of our children have too many toys. Have you thought about books for birthdays, Christmas, etc?

I find that his own subscription to a suitable magazine will often work wonders for a child's reading development. Try this for your child. Let the magazine be his choice. Here is a list of children's magazines. Please take a copy home with you.

I have said that you should provide a literate example for your child that you should provide a time and a place for him to read and something for him to read. These are all necessary, but your most critical action with respect to your child's reading development is to consciously and deliberately pattern your action in accord with his needs. Accept your child as he is -- with respect.

Avoid comparison -- especially with older and more successful (in reading) siblings. If your child's reading behavior is not all you would like, do not let him see that you are disappointed in him or that you are ashamed of his achievement. (Given that he is reading at an acceptable level for him) To let him see that you are ashamed of him or that you reject him will only add an emotional problem to his reading problem.

Nothing succeeds like success. A well kept secret around reading clinics over the nation is that a child who tests 0 in reading material provided for the grade to which he is assigned will make some score when the clinician lets him read from a book at the proper level.

You have been most courteous and attentive, and I have enjoyed talking to you. In conclusion, I should like to leave this final thought with you. Regardless of your child's reading ability, and no matter what you do, you can't go far wrong if your actions are governed not by your own pride but by the actual reading needs of your child.